The 4-H Club

Partners in paranoia

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African Americans aren't the only AIDS-traumatized U.S. group to harbor suspicions that the disease was no accident. Many gay men, Haitian Americans, drug users and people with hemophilia have also raised eyebrows about HIV's strange affinity for them, saying that their long history of abuse offers good reason to believe that the powers-that-be are hostile to their survival. These suspicions were fueled by the timing of AIDS, which appeared just after Ronald Reagan won the presidency, his way paved by a hate-mongering Christian Right. A parade of conspiracy theories was the result:

Homosexuals. Coming so soon after a spate of local anti-gay ballot initiatives, the epidemic's onset was seen by many gays as a plot. Reflecting his constituents' views, in 1983, Rep. Ted Weiss (D-NY) told a Greenwich Village AIDS forum that, "given the attitudes towards homosexuals by some segments of society, the possible utilization of biological weapons must be seriously explored." By 1985, the Native, a New York City gay paper,reported that 37 percent of gay men polled believed that AIDS was "created by the federal government for political reasons." That year, Larry Kramer's hit play The Normal Heart included a scene about an anti-gay biowarfare plot. In recent years, with better treatments and some victories for queer acceptance, these suspicions have largely dissipated. In some quarters, they've been superceded by the "dissident" view that AIDS is nonexistent, invented by a greedy medical establishment.

Haitian Americans. In the early '80s, Reagan greeted thousands of Haitian refugees fleeing a brutal U.S.-backed dictatorship with either forcible return or jail. As some detainees contracted either AIDS or gynecomastia (the development in men of female breasts), fears caught fire that U.S. authorities had injected the detainees with agents causing both illnesses. After years of litigation, the gynecomastia was linked to improper use of a toxic anti-lice spray. But the continued stigmatization of Haitians as "AIDS carriers" -- aided by a CDC label of "risk group" (a decision revoked after massive protests) -- simply stoked fears that a U.S. biowarfare campaign brought the disease to their community. In 1992-93, when Presidents Bush and Clinton held HIV positive Haitian refugees in filthy barbed-wire camps at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, Haitian American fears were reinforced, and their suspicions persist today.

Heroin Users. Long considered by diverse sectors of society as beneath contempt, many IDUs -- particularly people of color -- have seen AIDS as the final effort to wipe them out. Once needle exchange was shown to be effective at stemming HIV transmission, the intense political opposition

to its funding -- continuing through three presidencies -- confirmed users' fears. This remains perhaps the only U.S. population about which public figures can get away with saying, "Let 'em die," as Judge Judy did this year.

Hemophiliacs. In 1996, Corey Dubin, president of the Committee of Ten Thousand, spoke for many hemophiliacs when he likened their situation to that of the African-American men of the Tuskegee syphilis study, writing in POZ, "We were considered expendable in the name of both profit and so-called medical progress." He was referring to the negligence of drug companies that until 1985 refused to screen and heat-treat the blood products necessary for hemophiliacs' survival. Congress finally acknowledged responsibility when it passed the Ricky Ray Hemophilia Relief Fund Act to compensate those infected due to government and corporate negligence. Ironically, the AIDS-plot writers most quoted by African-American, gay and other conspiracy advocates are part of the same ultra-right groups that have demonized these communities for years. In the neo-fascists' telling, AIDS biowarfare programs were hatched by a Soviet-controlled UN hell-bent on global domination. And their solutions to this "man-made disease" are a malignant mix of mandatory HIV testing, forced partner notification, and quarantine of HIVers.

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